

Valley likes Obama visit, but water would be better

By Mark Grossi

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At the heart of California's \$44 billion agricultural economy, folks are thankful that President Barack Obama visited Friday, pledging drought emergency money to feed small towns and help farmers through an historic dry winter.

But the San Joaquin Valley really needs water, say farmers, water district officials and community leaders.

"I'm glad the president wants to help feed our community, so do we," said Robert Silva, mayor of Mendota in west Fresno County, where unemployment is forecast to hit 40% this summer. "But that's no fix. We need water and farm jobs."

Obama's visit came at a desperate hour for growers who have loans and contractual commitments on seasonal crops, such as tomatoes. Others face the loss of orchards and vineyards.

More than 2 million acres of Valley farm land may get no water at all from the federal Central Valley Project this summer.

If storms do show up, river water for west Valley growers must be moved across the troubled Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. Pumping at the delta is sometimes halted to protect dying fish species, such as delta smelt and salmon.

Fisheries advocates in Northern California say nature is being hit hard, too. They need help from federal agencies to capture and truck young salmon to the Pacific to keep the species healthy in coming years.

"It's a tough one this year," said Zeke Grader, executive director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations, based in San Francisco. "The federal agencies seem a little reticent to take extreme measures. We hope the president steps in to make sure the measures happen."

In the Valley on Friday, the president offered more than \$200 million -- much of it in livestock assistance. The drought has left the state's rangeland brown and mostly barren, prompting ranchers to feed their livestock with high-priced feed, or liquidate their herds.

Justin Oldfield, vice president of government relations for the Sacramento-based California Cattlemen's Association, was pleased with the federal help. "This is something that many of our members will be able to benefit from," he said.

To address the delta situation, the president supported Interior Department efforts to work with state agencies on ways to provide more water while protecting the ecosystem.

With most major reservoirs now below half full and the snowpack about a quarter of its usual size, there's not much water to manage. But whenever the rain finally shows up in great amounts, farm leaders would like to see delta pumping restrictions eased.

Dan Nelson, executive director of the San Luis & Delta-Mendota Water Authority, representing many west-side districts, said cutting back the pumps in the past has not prevented further decline of protected fish species.

"We've lost millions of acre-feet of water over the years to protect the fish, and it hasn't worked," Nelson said. "We need a broader approach that looks at other problems harming the fish, like water quality and predators."

Trent Orr, lawyer for Bay Area environmental watchdog Earthjustice, has been involved in Endangered Species Act cases over these fish for many years. He said he has no problem with federal officials being flexible about the pumping right now, as long as it is within the bounds of the law.

"Everyone shares the pain in this drought," he said. "But the Endangered Species Act needs to be observed."

Farmer Sarah Clark Woolf of Clark Brothers in Dos Palos said the situation is dire for everyone north and south. But no one will be hit harder than those in small west Valley towns, said Woolf, who is a board member for Westlands Water District.

"Go out and see what it's like in San Joaquin, Lemoore, Huron, Firebaugh and Mendota," she said, referring to unemployment of farm workers. "We can throw money at it this year, but it doesn't fix the problem we have in the delta."

Delta pumping is even a big factor this year on the east side of the Valley where 15,000 growers get San Joaquin River water from Millerton Lake. They may get a zero allocation because water from Millerton may be needed for land owners who have historic rights to the San Joaquin.

The land owners with historic rights traded their San Joaquin water decades ago for Northern California water pumped through the delta. They still have the right to claim Millerton water if they don't get enough from Northern California.

The land owners have never called on Millerton water, but it seems likely to happen this year.

Ron Jacobsma, general manager of the Friant Water Authority, representing the east-side farmers, said federal money will help farmers and he appreciated the president's visit.

"But without water, where does the money go?" he asked. "There's a whole economy supported by farming. How do you compensate the hardware store or any number of businesses relying on the farm economy? We really need water."

Staff writer Bob Rodriguez contributed to this report. The reporter can be reached at (559) 441-6316, mgrossi@fresnobee.com or @markgrossi on Twitter.

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